

# Idioms in English

A Pragmatic Analysis

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## 0. INTRODUCTION

In the present study I shall establish the *idiom* as a functional element of language. My approach will thus be based on a pragmatic view of language, as I have outlined below. Idioms are seen as a special category of lexical items which are not only determined through their structure, but which also show a specific type of behaviour in language use. By analysing this behaviour I hope to create a pragmatic model for English idioms and thus to provide a basis for a theory of idioms as a phenomenon of natural language.

The study consists of two major parts, the theoretical framework and a pragmatic analysis of conversational data. In the first part I begin with the term *idiom* as defined in the OED and compare the definitions given there with their application by different scholars. By way of introduction I then list the different views of idiomaticity that can be found in the literature and test them for their viability. This is followed by an account of the development of theories of idiomaticity. Starting with the less well known Soviet phraseologists (Vinogradov, Amosova, Kopylenko / Popova, Reichstein and Mel'čuk) I then proceed to non-generative approaches, in particular to Hockett's treatment of idioms as an all-embracing linguistic unit and Hesley's partial classification of idioms according to their syntactic function. A larger section is dedicated to transformational-generative approaches, i.e. Katz and Postal's initial suggestion for the treatment of idioms in such a framework and Weinreich's extension of their theory, followed by critical accounts of Chafe, Fraser and Newmeyer. The final part of the first chapter is taken up with a presentation of Makkai's stratificational theory and Koller's pragmatic approach.

In the second chapter of the theoretical framework I give a summary of pragmatic theories. As a starting point I establish deixis as an inherent feature of language in use. A discussion of different types of *presupposition* and *entailment* (Frege, Russell, Strawson, Van Fraassen and Keenan) then leads to Grice's theory of *speaker's meaning* and his *co-operative principle*. After a summary of *speech act theory* (Austin, Searle) and its extension to indirect speech acts I close the theoretical part with a brief account of *ethnomethodology* and its main concepts.



The conversational data underlying the pragmatic analysis is described in Chapter 3. Considering as many variables as possible (topic, participants, audience, communicative channel, etc.) I have chosen a corpus of more than 100,000 words. It is important that this material was collected without any specific conversational feature in mind and thus unblasted data should be guaranteed.

The pragmatic analysis of idioms begins with an ethnomethodological approach to the data. The elements I discovered through this method are then integrated into the framework established in Chapter 2, and I thus hope to find idiom-specific elements in conversation.

This study is based entirely on English, but not restricted to any one particular dialect. British English is dominant, but as I want to cover as wide a spectrum as possible, I shall include American English. It is a well known fact that tournure idioms in particular are different in their semantic components on either side of the Atlantic, but as my analysis is a pragmatic and not a semantic one, this should not make any difference. Moreover, it might lead to similarities with respect to language usage.

The concluding chapter deals with possible implications of the pragmatic analysis and shows what points need to be clarified in further studies in order to obtain a better view of idiomaticity as a cross-cultural phenomenon of language in use.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In my analysis of idioms in conversation we have seen that idioms are not as irregular as semantic and syntactic analyses claim. Although they show deficiencies with respect to syntactic rules and transformations and display semantic incompatibility with the concept of literal meaning, they can be assigned a specific function in everyday discourse. Idioms not only form a group because of their irregularities but also because of their regular functional behaviour.

However, it is not a valid argument to disprove linguistic theories of one type by a theory concerned with different aspects of the same language unit. In order to doubt the viability of such theories we have to find reasons from within their own model. A regularity of idioms in language usage can only start the linguists off in an attempt to re-evaluate their paradigms.

In the course of the development of theories of idiomaticity the starting point has been paradigms in which idioms had the status of anomalies. A great number of scholars chose the easiest way of merely steering clear of idioms (e.g. Bloomfield, Chomsky, de Saussure, Harris, Lyons, Martinet, Ullmann, etc.), a practice which is against the fundamental rules of science.

In semantic theories idioms are always considered to be parasitic on literal meaning. To quote the introduction to Th. Kuhn's book<sup>76</sup>, linguists were pre-occupied with "a strenuous and devoted attempt to force nature into the conceptual boxes supplied by professional education" (Kuhn, 1962:5). The basic concept they referred to was literal meaning, and it apparently never occurred to those semanticists that idioms, being "a normal problem, one that ought to be solvable by known rules and procedures" (ibid), should lead them to re-think the concept of literal meaning. Searle (1979:81) stated that "most - indeed all - of the authors I have read on the subject of metaphor assume that we know how literal utterances work". The same can be said of authors writing on the subject of idiomaticity. It is easy to show that literal utterances,

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76 Kuhn, Thomas S., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.

i.e. utterances the meaning of which is equal to the speaker's meaning, are as dependent on background assumptions and on the notion of similarity as so-called non-literal utterances are. It cannot be my task to redefine literal meaning in this study but semanticists should be made aware that such a re-definition might reassess idioms within their paradigm.

In transformational-generative theories idioms were classified according to their deficiencies with respect to transformations. However, there were linguists who took idioms as a starting point for new investigations of their paradigm (cf. especially Chafe, 1968), and some of them came to the conclusion that idioms were not as irregular as was first thought to be the case. But the main tendency was still to treat idioms with sub-rules that were compatible with the general theoretical framework.

What is common to all the approaches mentioned above is the fact that they work on the basis of an idealized, competent native speaker. But we must be aware that in discussing language phenomena we have to consider the natural speaker with his partial incompetence, who himself has to consider the partial incompetence of his conversational partner. Since the grammarian is forced to idealize his context-free system, he establishes grammaticality in order to leave out of consideration problems he cannot account for in his theory. Contradictions between grammars and pragmatics created by the dichotomy of competent and natural speakers might be levelled out in a linguistic model that accounts for partial incompetence, especially if we can find an interdependence of intra-linguistic elements and extra-linguistic problems of the natural speaker.

To summarize we can state the two concepts which need a closer investigation: literal meaning for the semantic component and the competence of the native speaker for the syntactic component.

Let us now come back to the pragmatic regularity established in my analysis and summarize the main points. Idioms do not normally occur with adverbs of time and place. Although a great number of idioms contain verbs, the temporal component is neutralized. If there is not already another sentence in the immediate context which can show tense relations, such a sentence is added. The focus of attention is thus clearly diverted from the tense component of idiomatic expressions and concentrated on other features. However, this cannot exclusively be the semantic component because the literal counterpart could be used without problem at all to convey such information.



We have found that the most relevant feature of idioms is the social constellation of the conversational participants and the object of idioms. Furthermore, idioms are marked by paralinguistic elements on either side, and they only occur at specific points within conversations. This pragmatic behaviour can be seen as a characteristic feature to classify such expressions and to establish them as a closed set. Although idioms are concatenations of several parts, they behave like units themselves and should be entered in the lexicon as lexemes in their own right. Being lexemes, on the one hand, and showing a specific behaviour, on the other hand, establishes idioms as a sub-set among the lexemes. This view is also compatible with the Lexical Representative Hypothesis, which claims that idioms are stored in exactly the same way as 'normal' lexemes and that the structural analysis is carried out in the same way. In other words, idioms are considered to be long lexemes and to be processed as such in a much shorter time than literal strings of elements.

Idioms behave like lexemes with respect to logical presuppositions and entailment. Their literal counterparts, consisting of ordinary lexemes, thus behave in the same way as idioms. The difference, however, lies in what they pragmatically presuppose. An utterance A pragmatically presupposes a proposition B iff A is only appropriately uttered if B is already mutually assumed. These mutual assumptions, which are idiom-specific, lead to a further problem for the speaker in deciding on the use of idioms. Since expectations in everyday situations are socially defined, the use of idioms in conversation affords a maximum certainty of knowing that the act performed will be understood by the addressee in the intended manner. It affords a maximum certainty concerning the mutuality of idiom-specific assumptions. Idioms are only used under clear conditions, which again accounts for the relatively low frequency of idioms in conversation.

Idioms are therefore not only lexemes which capture complex everyday situations semantically, but they are linguistic units that reduce the complexity of social interactions. Idioms contain information on the one hand, but they also provide a method of handling special situations. In this respect they come close to pragmatic idioms as introduced by Gordon/Lakoff, Sadock, Burger, Coulmas and others.

With respect to Grice's co-operative principle and his four conversational maxims, idioms do not show any intrinsic peculiarities. There are no grounds to consider them as elements which always result in flouting one of the ma-

xims and thus conversationally implicate specific information. Therefore, unlike Searle's theory of metaphor, a theory of semantics cannot be built on one or several maxims. This arises from the lexical status of idioms and from the Lexical Representation Hypothesis. As idioms are used and understood by the participants of a conversation as lexical units, they can also be used like lexemes with respect to the Gricean maxims. A speaker can obey or flout these maxims with idiomatic utterances and thus implicate additional meaning. However, idioms have to be distinguished from other lexemes by virtue of their conventional implicatures, which relate to the social relationship among the conversational partners and third persons to which reference is made. These conventional implicatures class idioms as a sub-category of lexemes.

If we distinguish conventions of language and conventions of usage (cf. Morgan, 1978) we arrive at a four-fold classification of conventionalization (cf. Sadock, 1979:61). Conventions of language are based on ordinary meaning conventions and conventions of usage are concerned with the methods employed to accomplish specific purposes in using conventional means. Both method and meaning can be conventional or non-conventional and as utterances consist of language means and employ certain methods we get the following four categories:

- no conventional methods and no conventional means
- conventional methods but no conventional means
- conventional methods and conventional means
- no conventional methods but conventional means.

This classification is rather vague in that it is based on the notion of literal meaning (see above) as a conventional means and because it only allows a two-valued assessment of convention. However, it allows us to classify idioms in a rough manner. With their fixed form idioms belong to the class of conventional means, as indeed all lexical items do. In contrast to Sadock, who based his notion of idioms on intuition, we have found in our analysis that idioms also belong to the class of conventional methods (and not to the class with no conventional methods). Idioms are used to accomplish certain ends, namely to make reference to the social structure and to manage complex everyday situations.

This study is entirely based on idioms in English. In order to prove the validity of the function of idioms in discourse, their behavioural patterns, it

is of great interest to compare my findings with data from other languages. As idioms are a cross-cultural phenomenon, we have the opportunity of choosing languages which are as unrelated as possible. In his stratificational approach Makkai compared the idiom structure of English with that of Hungarian and found a strong agreement from his point of view. If my approach is viable, such parallelism should be found on the pragmatic level, and despite the fact that different cultures show different social structures, the link between idioms as conventional means for conventional methods and what the speaker wishes to accomplish has to be present in all language societies. If idioms are a universal feature of language, they should also provide universal conventions for usage. In my treatment of idioms in English with data from different dialects and cultures a hint might be seen that such universal usage conventions are to be expected.

A further point worth considering is an ethnomethodological approach of other types of tropes, especially of metaphor. Searle's theory is a mere construct based on native speaker intuition, and with the example of idioms we have seen in Sadock's classification that such an approach may easily lead to a wrong result. An analysis of metaphor along the lines of this study would enable us to establish a difference between the pragmatic potential of metaphors and idioms. Referring back to the quotes given in the opening paragraph of section 4.3, where we saw a close relation between metaphors and idioms, such an analysis of tropes could serve as a basis for a theory of the process of the development from metaphor to idiom. Such a development theory should fill in the gaps between the two poles of convention with respect to language and usage, since metaphors (-[convent. means], - [convent. methods]) and idioms (+[convent. means], + [convent. methods] occupy the opposite poles of these scales.

Such a classification might be valuable for comparison with Fraser's partial classification of idioms according to their degree of transformational frozenness. Because language in general is in a state of flux - metaphors die and become idioms, concatenations block more and more transformations and finally become completely frozen - such a classification might not only serve as a descriptive model but also as a theory predicting language change. In such a way we can explain problems which occur in language usage with the help of intralinguistic features, and vice versa, and establish a link between linguistics and pragmatics.

Although there are many problems to be solved and many investigations to be carried out, I trust that I have been able to show that there is far more regularity in idioms than has previously been believed and that I have indicated the usefulness of pragmatic approaches for handling linguistic data.



## APPENDIX 1: LIST OF CONVERSATIONS

The following list only contains conversations referred to in this study, i.e. conversations containing idioms. At this point I should like to thank Karen Bennett, Chris Crick, Paul Keraswill, Marion Owen and Harley Stratton for their invaluable help in providing me with tapes and transcripts.

- Ac A student settling his college account with the college secretary.  
 Participants: student: female, 19 (St)  
                   secretary: female, 50 (S)  
 During the conversation two more people were present, a friend of the student (male, 28) and another secretary (male, 40), who did not participate.
- AD Conversations transcribed in Atkinson, J. Maxwell / Drew, Paul: *Order in Court, The Organisation of Verbal Interaction in Judicial Settings*, London, Macmillan, 1979.
- Ce Conversations transcribed in Cecil, Henry: *The Trial of Walter Graham Rowland*, Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1975.
- Cr Several undergraduates watching a cricket game involving their college team. Male and female participants.
- CR Cliff Richard in Great St. Mary, Cambridge, 20th April, 1980  
 Participants: C: Cliff Richard  
                   Rev.: The reverent of Great St. Mary  
 Audience: about 1400 (town and gown).
- Fa Conversation between a patient (girl, 17) and her therapist. Transcribed in Labov, William / Fanshel, David: *Therapeutic Discourse: Psychotherapy as Conversation*, New York: Academic Press, 1977.
- Go Conversations transcribed in Goodman, Jonathan: *The Trial of Ian Bradley and Myra Hindley*, Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1973.
- HA Heated argument between five students on the grant system provided by the British government.  
 Participants: 5 students (A, B, C, D and E).

- HP Housewarming party. 6 male students at the end of the party after all the girls had left (Age: 24 - 28).
- IW Intensive Workshop. The transcripts are taken from a four-week Gestalt Therapy workshop involving 24 people at Esalen Institute during the summer of 1968. Printed in Perls, Frederick S.: *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*, Lafayette (Cal.): Real People Press, 1969.
- PL Porter's Lodge. A student is trying to change money at the porter's lodge of a Graduate College in Cambridge. Another student only listens to the conversation first but finally has to join in.  
Participants: S: Student (male, 25)  
P: Porter (male, 55)  
H: Student (male, 40)
- RPh Radio phone-in programme on the increasing unemployment rate in Great Britain and on the problems of people on the dole.  
Participants: A: Interviewer (male)  
B: Caller (male)
- SSt A radio debate on the Steel Strike.  
Participants: S: Bill Sirs  
V: Sir Charles Villiers  
A: Interviewer
- Su Different conversations transcribed in Sudnow, David (ed.), *Studies in Social Interaction*. Although the conversations referred to are from different authors and vary accordingly I have decided to use the same abbreviation as a help for the interested reader.
- TI A television interview on television interviews.  
Participants: L: Interviewer  
D: Interviewee
- To Several extracts from cross-examinations of a witness who complained that a man from whom she had accepted a lift had raped her. Transcribed in Toner, Barbara: *The Facts of Rape*, London: Hutchinson & Co., 1977.
- WH *The White House Transcripts*, edited by the New York Times. For my analysis I have examined Appendix 4, 5 and 6. The participants are mainly the President and his close advisers Dean and Haldeman.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

I was born in Zurich on 17th February, 1951. From 1958 to 1964 I attended primary school, first in Zurich, then at Effretikon. In 1964 I entered the Gymnasium Winterthur, and in 1970 I passed the final examination (Type B, with English as the second compulsory foreign language). After three terms at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (Constructional Engineering) and after passing the Pre-Diploma Examination, I began my studies in English, German Linguistics and Physics at the University of Zurich. In 1974/75 I taught German as a Language Assistant in Crawley (Sussex, England). In 1977 I concluded my studies with the Lizentiat. After some time in the United States, I taught English at the Kantonsschule Olten. In 1979 I was granted the Queen Elizabeth II Silver Jubilee Scholarship, which allowed me to study Theoretical Linguistics at the University of Cambridge (Gonville and Caius College). In October 1980 I graduated with the degree of Master of Philosophy.

